

# Reconceptualizing Interactional Groups: Grouping Schemes for Maximizing Language Learning

*Group work. When it works, we are pleased. But when it does not—when the learners stare at each other without speaking or when two learners begin an argument that threatens to disrupt the whole lesson—we know we should have done it better.*

In the field of English as a Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL), it has long been recognized that for second language acquisition to occur learners must use English to construct meaning and interact with others in authentic contexts. The importance of learner interaction in acquiring a second language has made the *teacher-directed student-centered* classroom the standard for effective instruction, in print if not in practice. While this standard may seem contradictory, effective teacher directives can optimize student autonomy and facilitate effective cooperative learning, which is at the core of a student-centered environment. These principles have led to the increasing use of group work in the second language classroom, wherein students work in teams to construct knowledge and accomplish tasks through collaborative interac-

tion. However, not much has been written about the classroom management strategies that underlie the practice, and less has been written about directing the membership of small groups as students engage in learning tasks and activities.

For many teachers, group activity planning is often based on last-minute decisions or left to chance. When there is forethought, it mostly surrounds putting problem students in the “least-likely-to-cause-trouble” group. Teachers frequently comment that they have not been given clear guidance in the management of groups; in fact, a quick survey of current TESOL education and methods texts reveals little information about how to accomplish this complex classroom management task beyond the recommendations that teachers use interactional groups because of

the multiple benefits for English learners (Diaz-Rico 2008), use a variety of groupings tied to the instructional purpose (Echevarria, Vogt, and Short 2008), and make the process for cooperative groups (task orientation, roles, appropriate behaviors, etc.) explicit to students (Herrell and Jordan 2008).

However, drawing together information from a range of educational areas including curriculum, second language acquisition studies, and effective school research, we can create some reasonable guidelines for reconceptualizing the process of forming groups. An exploration of the types of collaborative tasks and activities that most successfully meet the instructor's objectives will go a long way towards optimizing the effectiveness of groups, and will affect decisions about successful strategies and group size and configuration. After discussing the rationale for collaborative interaction, this article will offer examples on how to deal with these group management issues when coordinating collaborative work in the ESL/EFL classroom.

### **What the research says**

Language acquisition research has long supported the benefits of student interaction, which include useful language practice (Doughty and Pica 1986, among others), student-to-student scaffolding during challenging tasks (Storch 2001, among others), and the formation of personal agency in academic settings (Morita 2004). However, research also yields a conflicting picture of what happens when students interact in groups and even questions the effectiveness of collaborative groups. While early research suggested that language manipulation increased in small-group activities (Doughty and Pica 1986), other research found that "negotiating for meaning" was not an often-used strategy and that some learners chose to remain disengaged in the group setting. In other words, while the teacher may strive to foster engaging student interaction during the lesson, students may have other ideas. Recent research points to an intricate web of factors that affect the types of interaction and level of learner participation in group activities. The role of personality, sense of agency, and collaborative orientation (Storch 2001; Morita 2004), and proficiency level (Watanabe and Swain 2007)

suggest that the picture is more complex than what had previously been assumed.

Nevertheless, even though the research on the quality of interaction in groups is not altogether clear, teachers generally do agree that a well-planned group activity holds great potential value. Small-group collaboration allows learners to rehearse for the larger whole-class discussion to follow, to practice pronunciation of words, to structure conversations conceptually, and to build conversational efficacy in a less formal and less anxiety-ridden context. In addition to increased language practice, the ability to appropriately interact in groups has become a goal in itself, in part because many students will be required to work on team projects in courses such as global business, science, and other academic subjects taught in U.S. classrooms.

### **How many students in a group?**

The first decision the teacher must face involves the optimum number of learners per group. Bell (1988) suggests a range of three to seven students. One misconception of teachers is that all groups must have the same number of members. In fact, a group of reticent students may be capped at three to force all to speak, while a larger group of six dominant students will receive valuable practice at social turn-taking. There is no instructional rule that demands equal group size.

### **Fixed vs. flexible grouping**

The second decision that teachers face is *fixed grouping* (consistent group membership for extended periods) vs. *flexible grouping* (the teacher decides group membership for each lesson or task). Fixed group rosters allow learners to get to know others in a deeper way and to develop tolerant and trusting relationships; it also saves the teacher valuable planning time. However, when groups remain together for too long, learners may be missing out on a diversity of viewpoints and language interactions. Thus, the balance between the security of established groups and the chance to work with most members of the class becomes a goal of grouping strategies. One solution proposed by Bell (1988) joins the two conflicting goals: each student belongs to three or four different fixed groups and rotates among them based on the learn-

ing objectives and the type of task that is assigned.

### **Planning for group membership**

Twenty-five years ago, the use of small interactional groups was designed to facilitate communication in a new language, which acknowledged the important role of socially situated interaction in the development of communicative competence (Savignon 1983). As educators, we focused on student personalities in grouping decisions or perhaps decided to group according to relative language proficiency. However, the current focus on academic pre-university preparation in many programs, both in the United States and in international settings, demands that we take a new look at the way in which we form collaborative groups to ensure that all learners engage deeply with the academic content, develop spoken literacy for academic interaction, and assert themselves and participate effectively in the academic conversation.

Most educators believe that the skills needed to participate in group discussions and team decision-making can be explicitly taught and practiced. The membership of the interactional group is a critical consideration. A group that is well matched to the task will talk a lot even if the task is weak. Conversely, a teacher could design a rich learning experience, but if the individuals choose non-involvement because of the group membership, it fails. Choosing group membership requires much artistry, as it demands sensitivity to cultural contexts, to individual personalities in the class, and to the variety of skill levels.

I experienced this challenge firsthand when structuring interactional groups in my multilingual class of university students. (While my teaching context was an ESL program for international students in the United States, the same principles apply in EFL contexts.) My students had a wide range of language proficiencies and English experiences, and an even greater diversity of specific language skill levels and personality types. Some students had great oral fluency but were less strong in reading and writing; others lacked proficiency in speaking but were advanced learners in reading, and to a

lesser extent, writing. For example, Edgardo, a student from Venezuela who had spent a year in a U.S. high school, was orally fluent but scored significantly lower on his English reading test. He sat next to Pongsak, a quiet student from Thailand, who had been in the United States for only a few weeks when the class began. While Edgardo's spoken English was nearly as fluent as a native speaker's and he spoke with confidence, Pongsak's speaking was hesitant and often difficult to comprehend. However, both Edgardo's and Pongsak's writing differed substantially from standard academic English, and both had similar reading proficiencies that limited their access to academic texts. My instructional objective was to prepare both students for college-level work in an English-medium university and to provide them with the collaborative speaking skill and academic English experience necessary to participate in the student-led team projects advocated by U.S. colleges. While my goals were the same for each of these learners, their ability to progress towards acquiring language and collaborative skills in group work would have been limited had I only considered my goals and not the complex interactional patterns that would help or hinder acquisition as Pongsak and Edgardo worked together in the group.

There are several bases on which experienced teachers form groups: language proficiency, personality, friendships, shared native language, and academic orientation. However, one of the variables not often considered by the classroom teacher is the objective of the task itself. While general guidelines may point the teacher in the direction of conventional wisdom, the content of the task may point a different way. Several options on how to plan group membership around task objectives follow.

### **Oral language proficiency grouping**

One of the first instincts of a teacher is to group students heterogeneously so that the members with higher proficiency can support the learners with lower proficiency. However, without intervention and planning, the students with higher spoken English proficiency often will take over the conversational workload, giving the less proficient little practice in speaking. This replicates the typical conversation pattern when my low-proficiency English

learners are put on collaborative teams with native English speakers. The English learners sit silently at the periphery of the circle, marginalized from the group. Thus, in the ESL classroom, it is often better to group individuals by similar proficiency so that all will have equal opportunity and responsibility to speak. One technique for quick implementation is to keep a list of students ordered by proficiency level, with the most proficient students in the class at the top and the least proficient at the bottom. If you choose to form triads, for example, count down the list by three, draw a line, and group by three until you reach the end of the list. This gives you ready-made proficiency groups.

Another instructional strategy, if you do group heterogeneously, is to use a multi-response format by arranging a series of tasks in increasing levels of difficulty. Assign specific students to the tasks that best fit their proficiency levels. For example, if I want students to discuss the causes of the American Civil War, I might list and number five questions at increasing levels of linguistic challenge. Question 1 might ask simply, "In what years did the Civil War happen?" Question 5, for the highest proficiency student, might read, "How did the differing cultures of North vs. South contribute to the causes of the American Civil War?" Each student is assigned a question number to report on, based on his or her proficiency level.

### **Personality grouping**

Personality grouping is based on dominance vs. reticence. In other words, in a homogeneous scheme, active students are grouped together to fight it out, allowing reticent learners to interact more casually. If you have designed a task that has a defined outcome and learners understand that there is a job to be accomplished, then grouping the reticent learners together forces them to take the initiative to complete the task even though there may be a minimal use of English. Noise does not always equal shared participation. In fact, when groups are less loud, often it is because all learners are giving a respectful space to speak. The loudest groups sometimes signal the owning of the conversation by an argumentative few. When the objective is for learners to work with a problem and achieve consensus on a solu-

tion, this homogeneous grouping scheme will maximize chances for all group members to engage in conversation.

When forming groups based on personality, it is important for the teacher to designate a group leader who possesses the positive traits of high task orientation, negotiating ability, and leadership. In following this plan, the group leader models effective leadership for other members so that later they may take over the leadership role.

### **Controlled affiliation grouping**

What is the level of trust among group members? How important is diversity of opinion and diversity of perception? When friends are grouped with friends, trust will be high, but diversity will be limited because of the likelihood of common experiences and viewpoints. In general, asking learners to work with members of the class whom they do not know well fosters more on-task learning, allows multiple viewpoints to be considered, and nurtures the growth of a class community as individuals get to know and trust one another. However, if the topic is emotionally charged and controversial, creating a safe space to allow free discussion may make instructional sense. For example, in the discussion of a piece of literature that contained chapters of violence and sexually suggestive scenes, I grouped by gender and close affiliation, which allowed for a safer, deeper, and more authentic literary analysis. This was the case in the class reading of Maya Angelou's (1971) *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The affiliation grouping allowed me to speak privately with a group of female students about skipping one chapter that might have been uncomfortable or objectionable, and allowed the students to discuss those parts of the book that were personally engaging but topically safe.

### **Shared first language (L1) groupings**

Do you have a multilingual class of English learners? Generally, it is prevailing wisdom to group learners together who do not share a native language since this fosters maximum communication in English. Students then have no other choice but to use English as the medium of conversation to accomplish a task. However, there may be an academic task for which you want your

learners to use academic resources and terminology in the L1 to assist the task in the L2. When the objective is to master challenging content with language learning as an auxiliary goal, grouping learners by L1 groups is reasonable. For example, when you are teaching the finer points of English punctuation, allowing learners to use some L1 to discuss the nuances of punctuation leads to more efficient learning, in addition to the value-added discussions of punctuation differences between languages. Paradoxically, English accuracy may be facilitated through the use of the L1 to scaffold the L2. Furthermore, when the academic task requires the cognitive processing of highly abstract information, allowing the shared language groups to codeswitch during discussion leads to greater analytic depth. For example, identifying elements of deconstructionism within a novel demands that learners codeswitch in order to fully analyze literary factors.

#### Academic orientation groups

Are there class members who are less prepared academically than others? Does the task suggest that a mix of students will allow the stronger to scaffold the less strong, enhancing the academic conversation for all? For example, when integrating challenging academic content, such as science, with language learning, learners with strong academic backgrounds (irrespective of proficiency) can supply needed content expertise that allows all group members to learn the content and concurrently focus on language development. If the goal is for learners to develop collaborative

knowledge, heterogeneous grouping based on content knowledge makes sense.

Although the intricacies in group work planning may seem overwhelming at first, much of the process can become routine. Establishing a variety of grouping schemes at the beginning of the year, giving each grouping scheme a name, and listing the learners in that scheme on a chart posted in the classroom leads to more efficient teacher planning.

#### Planning the interactional group task

The critical approach to planning for groups is to focus on what key outcomes you hope to see in your learners and to plan rich, thoughtful, and interesting tasks for group work. On the surface, designing a group task appears relatively easy, but to achieve outcomes beyond simple language practice the teacher must construct tasks and implement strategies that address not only language practice, but also support content learning, foster critical thinking, and develop a hoped-for supportive classroom community. Table 1 lists several instructional strategies that can be used to achieve five desired learner outcomes.

#### Assigning group roles

Again, it is important to assign each group member a role within the group. While the teacher may select the *leader-facilitator* or may have each group choose the leader on its own, other roles are also needed:

- Choose a *scribe* to take notes and organize the group discussion on a large piece of paper so every group member can follow the discussion threads.

**Table 1: Effective Instructional Strategies for Desired Learner Outcomes**

Desired Learner Outcomes	Effective Instructional Strategies
1. Foster a sense of community, belonging, and safety.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin your class with community-building activities for the explicit purpose of having students learn one another's names, personalities, and cultures. This develops tolerance for cultures and ethnicities that have experienced mutual attitudes of bias or conflict.</li> <li>• Design tasks and activities that are personally meaningful and capture the teachable moment of a learner engaged in the difficult task of communicating in a new language. Embed the task in a narrative to foster personal connections.</li> </ul>



<p>2. Maximize opportunities for rehearsing, practicing, and engaging in creative manipulation of the language.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design group tasks so that <i>all</i> learners <i>must</i> participate and contribute to the group. Design and assign tasks that compel the group to find a solution to a problem, resolve a conflict, or reach consensus on an issue.</li> <li>• Provide the linguistic input necessary for learners to fully perform and benefit from the task. Teach vocabulary, idioms, and structures needed for meaning-making. Give learners the opportunity to individually prepare and rehearse the language before it is called into use by allowing five minutes of study time before the group discussion begins.</li> <li>• In a classroom with diverse proficiencies, create multiple response formats related to the topic (easier tasks for lower proficiency, harder for more advanced learners).</li> </ul>
<p>3. Utilize functional language to accomplish a linguistic, academic, or managerial task.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explicitly teach functional language and conversational strategies that learners will likely need, such as how to disagree and interrupt in a polite manner. Teach learners awareness of body language appropriate for English-situated conversations (leaning slightly forward, making eye contact, etc.).</li> </ul>
<p>4. Increase awareness of other cultures and tolerance for diverse personalities. Engage in appropriate social practices for the context.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Define specific but revolving roles for learners (discussion leader, notetaker, etc.) so that all learners are secure in expectations but have an opportunity to engage in differing roles and at times assume leadership.</li> <li>• Make the <i>rules of engagement</i> explicit to solidify expectations for tolerance of diverse viewpoints, respectful use of language, equality of turn-taking, and the right to speak. Consider writing these rules down on chart paper and posting them during group work.</li> </ul>
<p>5. Develop new knowledge about a content area or cultural topic. Engage in critical thinking and problem solving.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate important academic or cultural content in the design of activities so students are not only growing linguistically, but are gaining knowledge. Design tasks that replicate the kind of academic tasks that students will need outside the classroom in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or U.S. K–12 settings, which facilitates the conceptual bridge between the ESL/EFL classroom and academic contexts.</li> <li>• Foster critical thinking through a task design that requires students to read, write, and listen to academic or other information sources before engaging in the academic conversations required for the task.</li> <li>• Design tasks that engage and challenge students on a deep linguistic and knowledge level involving problem solving, predicting, critiquing, applying, and other cognitively challenging manipulations of language and information.</li> <li>• Choose topics of interest that will engage and excite the learners to know more and discuss more freely.</li> </ul>

- Appoint a *reporter* to report back to the class during a whole-class debrief.
- Assign a *vocabulary monitor* to compile new words from a discussion and give each group member a list the following day.
- Appoint a *time monitor* to keep track of the time allowed for the discussion.

Depending on the task and the number of members in each group, roles may be added or deleted. Remember, however, that even though each student might have a different role, all group members must still participate in the assigned task (for example, the time manager should not simply sit and look at the clock). And, to make sure that all students know what each role entails, teachers should clearly explain the responsibilities of each role before group work begins.

### Reconceptualizing interactional groups

With the increasing complexity of the ESL/EFL curriculum amidst a push for content-infused language teaching, it is crucial to reconceptualize interactional groups and to consider a greater sophistication of decision-making, not only in the intentional choices we make in membership but also in the tasks that we construct for group work. Certainly, while the examples above represent only a small sample of potential schemes, each educator must reflect on the unique classroom context and class membership when directing group work to meet objectives. The bottom line is that the quality of learner interaction is too important to be left to chance. If we intend to maximize language learning and use, greater reflection and planning will certainly be needed.

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